“Every normal organization would have stepped away”: Organizational resilience in self-managing organizations

Verena Stingl, v.stingl@gmx.at, Aalborg University

Abstract

Self-managing organizations (SMOs) share particular characteristics, such as flexible hierarchies and empowered members, which suggest increased organizational resilience in turbulent environments. Yet, in absence of an authoritative body deploying resources and people, organizational resilience of SMOs grounds fundamentally in the individual choices and actions of their members. This paper thus assumes a rare position in research on organizational resilience, exploring individual behaviour and cognition as fundament of resilience. Based on a case study of a radical SMO in crisis, the paper identifies five micro-foundations of organizational resilience and discusses them against organizational characteristics. I synthesise the identified interactions into a model of the micro-foundations of organizational resilience. The model provides new theoretical propositions on how organizational characteristics create enhanced situational awareness and self-motivated action in the SMO’s members as basis for organizational resilience.

The Borderland is a recurring, weeklong participatory event of more than 2,000 co-creators, based on the principles of Burning Man. It has no formal organizational structure, managerial body, or employees. In 2018, it lost its Danish location six weeks before the event, while Scandinavia suffered the worst draught in history. This is the story of how it happened anyway. (Picture © Sofus Albertsen)

1. Introduction

Organizational resilience is the organization's ability to respond effectively to a disruption, strain, or crisis (Boin & Eeten, 2013). Resilience builds on the anticipation and detection of emerging strains (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001/2015), and the effective deployment of available physical/financial, cognitive, emotional, and relational resources to counter them (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007).

How organizations develop and maintain both the necessary awareness, and the ability to deploy effectively, has been a matter of academic debate for three decades (Yang, 2019). While some authors focus solely on managerial and structural characteristics (e.g. Wied et al., 2020), resilience is widely suggested as deeply intertwined with organizational culture (de Oliveira Teixeira & Werther, 2013; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). Moreover, authors suggest that to explain resilience, research needs to focus on intra-organizational dynamics (Kahn et al., 2018), or even on the cognitive and behavioural micro-foundations within the individual (Williams et al., 2017). Thus, resilience is a complex phenomenon with dynamically interacting layers. Yet, how these layers relate has so far only been a vague conceptual discussion (Yang, 2019). Thus, following the argument brought forward by Boin & van Eeten (2013), to understand organizational resilience, we need to move from descriptive principles and characteristics (e.g. Kutsch & Hall, 2016; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001/2015), to an in-depth understanding of *how* organizations manage their unexpected events.

To add to our understanding of how structure, organizational context, and behaviour interact, I turn to self-managing organizations (SMO; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). These organizations differ substantially in structure and context from previous objects of resilience research, as they by default adopt certain cultural and structural characteristics suggested as typical or enabling for resilient organizations. Their fluid or flat structures are akin to the characteristic of resilient organizations that can suspend hierarchies and structures to enable flexible responses (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001/2015). Their higher level of individual self-control has been linked to increasing employee voice behaviour (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), suggesting the potential for distributed organizational attention. Moreover, their higher level of individual empowerment and psychological safety are factors that have been suggested as contributing to flexible action in turbulent environments (Ancona et al., 2002).

These characteristics would suggest that self-managing organizations should be among the more resilient. Yet, while their structure allows for more flexibility, the inherent absence of a central coordinating body and authority can become a hurdle in deploying people and resources quickly and effectively (Foss & Klein, 2014). Moreover, when a less-hierarchical organization draws mainly from voluntary work, the mobilization of people can become highly dependent on their individual motivation to take action (Bidee et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, self-managing, volunteer driven organizations have repeatedly proven resilient in times of crises. Thus, research of organizational resilience in these organizations can provide valuable insights on the interplay or structural, organizational, and individual foundations of resilience. With this research, I thus investigate resilience in a radical case of an SMO in face of existential crisis, asking: How do individuals in a self-managing organization without formal hierarchical structures enact resilient responses in crises?

The case I explore is the art event “The Borderland”, a participatory festival based on the principles of Burning Man (Chen, 2009), gathering more than 2000 co-creating members from all over the world for a week in Denmark. The Borderland considers itself as a prototype for novel organizing and “being together”, having no formal organizational structure and no employees – and is thus completely dependent on voluntary actions of its “co-creators”. During June and July 2018, the event faced a series of crises that for other events of this kind have resulted in cancellation: it lost its original location six weeks before the event, while the worst draught in the history of Scandinavia overshadowed the pressured search for a new site.

Following a surge of momentum from numerous members, the community was able to find and secure a new location. To do so, they had to align the requirements of authorities, with the needs and expectations of hundreds of people that were independently working on infrastructure, art installations, or the organization of self-sufficing camps. During the crisis, the Borderland organization exhibited extreme resilience: responding quickly and effectively to a series of disruptions, flexibly shifting resources and priorities, and ultimately conducting the event successfully. Yet, as an SMO, the resilient response happened without central orchestration, as interaction of independent and self-motivated actors. In this paper, I explore the interplay of

structural, contextual, and behavioural factors that contributed to the observed resilient action.

This work contributes to the literature on resilient organizations, by adding a new facet of research through the model of micro-foundations of resilient organizations developed throughout this paper. Moreover, by theorizing on resilient properties and practices of radical SMOs, this study contributes to theory and practice of an increasingly relevant type of organizing.

2. Resilience in temporary organizations

Organizational resilience is the *"maintenance of positive adjustments under challenging conditions such that the organization emerges [..] strengthened and more resourceful"* (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 3418). Thus, resilience exceeds the mere absorbance of disruptions as it implies the deliberate activation and deployment of resources – often in new modes – to respond to new conditions. It also goes beyond robust adaption, as it captures not only the transformation from one equilibrium to a new, but acknowledges a continuously changing environment (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2005).

While research showed that excess resources and slack increase resilience, such buffers in themselves are not sufficient (Gittel et al. 2006 as cited in Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). As Vogus and Sutcliffe elaborate *"It is not merely the stocks of resources that determine resilience, but also the deployment of the resources that exist"* (2007; p. 3421). Yet, to deploy resources resiliently, organizations need both the ability to anticipate and prepare for disruptive events, but even more so the ability to constantly monitor and detect emerging, unexpected situations (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001/2015).

How organizations develop this awareness and ability to deploy resiliently has been an ongoing academic debate for over more than three decades (Yang, 2019). Research close to engineering disciplines, such as project studies or supply chain management, have predominately focused on managerial or structural factors of resilience. For example, Wied et al. (2020) identified eleven managerial approaches that added flexibility to either means or goals as increasing resilience in exploratory projects. Other authors have criticised dominant managerial approaches based on planning and predictions as limiting for project resilience (Kutsch & Hall, 2016; Nachbagauer & Schirl-Boeck, 2019).

Yet, organizational studies have highlighted the role of contextual factors as antecedes or mechanisms of organizational resilience. Example of these contextual factors are leadership (de Oliveira Teixeira & Werther, 2013), and organizational attention (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006), or the ability to improvise (Weick, 1993), amongst others (see Yang, 2014 for a comprehensive overview).

Capturing a broader view, Weick and Sutcliffe (2001/2015) proposed five principles of highly resilient organizations, which they suggested as foundations of resilient organizational culture: preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise. Transcending the level of organizational culture alone, Lengnick-Hall and Beck (2011; 2005) developed a high-level model of "resilience capacity". Their model is a blend of cognitive, behavioural, and contextual components, capturing the main themes of resilience research: sensemaking and identity, learning and habits, social capital, networks, psychological safety, and diffuse power. However, they do not follow up in suggesting how the components of their model interact.

Adding to the already fragmented debate, Kahn et al. (2018) suggested that resilience is not a property of the organization-as-a-whole but is formed through patterns of interactions of its subcomponents. Moreover, comparing the literatures of crisis management and organizational resilience, Williams et al. (2017) pointed to the eminent role of the micro-foundational level, that often had been overlooked in studies of organizational resilience.

In summary, organizational resilience has been studied through three lenses. First, structural and managerial foundations: the availability of resources and the flexibility of their deployment; Second, contextual characteristics that enhance awareness and responsiveness; Third, behavioural and cognitive properties that motivate and enable the resilient actions of the organization's actors. However, no comprehensive model linking these layers has been proposed so far.

3. Self-managing organizations

In their review article on self-managing organizations (SMOs), Lee and Edmondson (2017) define SMOs as those organizations that *"radically decentralize authority in a formal and systematic way throughout the organization"*. Thus, such organizations stand in opposition to traditional hierarchically organized and top-down planned

organizations, that, amongst other issues, have been criticised for being too rigid to adequately respond in dynamic environments. In consequence, academics and practitioners have long suggested that SMOs, or post-bureaucratic management, are more resilient in uncertain and turbulent environments (Ancona et al., 2002).

In outlining a research agenda, Lee and Edmondson (2017) highlight two particular areas of interest. First, they point to the lack of insight how coordination in complex or emergent contexts forms in the absence of managerial authority. Foss and colleagues (Foss & Dobrajska, 2015; Foss & Klein, 2014) have stressed the relevance of higher authorities and managers in resolving disputes or creating direction. Hence, in absence of these authoritative bodies, SMOs might turn to different peer-based mechanisms or structures to fill these needs for direction and arbitration. Secondly, Lee and Edmonsson (2017) stress the importance of understanding the individual perception of the SMO through their members. Indeed, SMOs might not be suited for any type of worker or personality, with some individuals struggling with their loose structures, while others seem to strive in them (Bernstein et al., 2016). This work combines these two lines of inquiry into the following research question: How do individuals in self-managing organizations without formal hierarchical structures enact resilient responses in crises?

4. Methodology

The study follows an embedded single case-study design (Yin, 2009), engaging an inductive grounded methodology for data analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). For the research, I adopted a practice approach (Blomquist & Nilsson, 2010; Cicmil et al., 2006) to uncover response practices of the community when facing disruptions.

The case of the Borderland relocation is an extreme case and thereby particularly suited for theoretical exploration (Siggelkow, 2007). First, the community exhibited extreme tenaciousness despite several near deaths, in conditions where *"every normal organization would have stepped away"*, as many of the participants interviewed for this research agreed. For example, the similar event "Kiwiburn" in New Zealand was cancelled when it lost its location seven months before the event. Second, the Borderland is a community extremely professed to self-organization and distributed leadership in the spirit of Laloux' "Teal Organizations" (2014). As a non-commercial, purpose-driven community, operating under the maxim "everyone is an

organizer", it provides deep insight into how people of varied backgrounds collaborate in crises outside of traditional organizational structures. Thus, the case represents an extreme type of self-managing organization.

To analyse the case, I collected data from four types of sources:

1) Semi-structured interviews with 11 Borderland members that took active roles in the relocation crisis;
2) Documented communications on the dedicated Borderland online-platform "Talk" and the Borderland Facebook-Group from June and July 2018 (both open and private groups) (ca. 650 pages);
3) Review of other documents made available by Borderland members, such as maps, meeting minutes, or e-mail conversations, or other openly available online documentation (ca. 50 pages);
4) Auto-ethnography inspired research, grounded on my participation in The Borderland since 2016 (although not in 2018), thus complementing the research with in-depth knowledge of the terms, practices, and networks of the community.

The interviews followed a two-part structure. First, I prompted the interviewee to give a personal account on how they became a co-creator of the Borderland, to provide context of their perception of the organization and its practices. In the second part, I asked them to tell their personal story of their actions and perceptions during the relocation. Through follow-up questions, I clarified statements and probed into themes related to decision-making and problem solving, situational perception, agency, power, and other.

To analyse the case, I first created a timeline of the events based on interviews and online communication data, written up as a detailed case description that I confirmed with the interviewees, and made available to the whole community. I then iteratively coded the interviews, initially identifying incidents that exhibited either awareness or responsiveness to strains or disruptions. I triangulated the instances described in the interviews with documents and online communication from the time of the crisis to check for consistency or biased recollections. Next, I identified concepts that participants explicitly or circumstantially identified as enabling or underlying their action and behaviour.

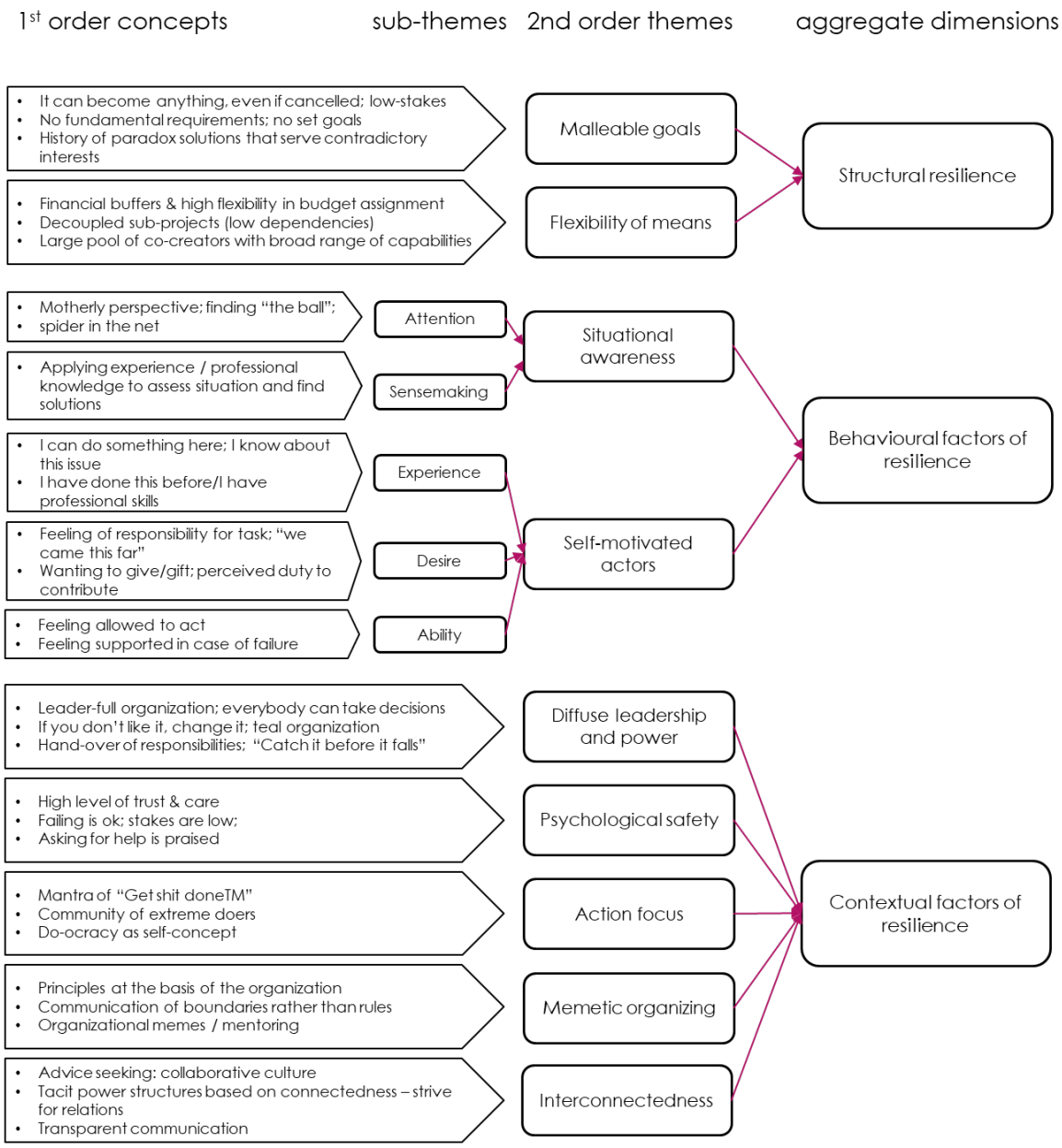

Figure 1 - Data structure

I grouped the identified primary concepts into nine themes and five subthemes. Following the three lenses of resilience research introduces in section two, I aggregated the themes under three dimensions "structural resilience", "micro-foundations of resilience" and "contextual factors of resilience" (Figure 1).

5. The case of the Borderland relocation crisis

The Borderland is a recurring annual event inspired by the 10 principles of the Burning Man festival (Chen, 2009). First taking place as a gathering of less than 50 people at a beach in Sweden in 2010, it has grown to an event with over 3000 co-creators in

July 2019. The event has no set organizational structure. In its homepage, it states *"The Borderland is an empty container to fill with fun and fantastic things. A lot of energy goes into making that container, and nobody gets paid. We're a decentralised and volunteer organisation. Most of the time no one will ask you to do any of these things, but pick a task and start doing it and everyone will start cheering for you."*[1]

While formally, the Borderland has an elected board, the association's bylaws state that the role of the Board is to *"ensure the conditions that allow individual members to take initiative as much as possible."* Many members in consequence perceive the organization as a do-ocracy (Chen, 2009; Verhoeven et al., 2014), i.e. an organizational set-up where members individually identify tasks and implement them. However, members of the community interested in developing The Borderland's organizational foundation have, in 2017, introduced organizational mechanisms inspired by Laloux's concept of "Teal Organizations" (2014). In particular, the community has adopted the "Advice Process" as a transparent mode for decentralized decision-making through the *Talk* online-platform[2].

A key organizational element of The Borderland is the concept of "*Realities",* practical needs such as infrastructure and administrative tasks. During preparation, individual members step up as *"Reality Leads"* assuming responsibility for individual identified tasks or needs. Since 2017, the *Realities Platform*[3] provides an online tool to coordinate and document the work of the *Reality Leads*.

5.1. The relocation crisis

From 2015 onwards, the event had taken place in Boesdal, a former lime quarry at the seaside in the south of Zealand, Denmark, during the last week of July. For years, the local municipality had rented out the quarry ignorant of the fact that the site fell under strict coastal protection law. This legal situation only became known during the preparation in 2018, leading effectively to a loss of the location on June 11, six weeks before the event.

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[1] https://talk.theborderland.se/main/ (accessed June 3, 2020)
[2] https://talk.theborderland.se/advice/ (accessed June 3, 2020)
[3] http://realities.theborderland.se/ (accessed June 3, 2020)

The Board informed the community on the same day about the unexpected situation, outlining two paths of action: work on the dispensation application for the coastal authority, and scouting for new locations. Within the next three days, several members of the community independently started exploring and reaching out to landowners of possible sites in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Germany.

When, on June 14, the coastal authority issued a definitive no for Boesdal, the community was already developing five promising leads across Scandinavia. The scouting teams worked the sites independently, being empowered "*to negotiate as if the Borderland was completely on board with it happening and the location that [they were] scouting, up until the point of contract*" (former Board member).

From the beginning, Hedeland – a renatured mining site 30 km from Copenhagen, Denmark – was amongst the most preferred options. The site was close to the previous location, thus for most required no travel changes; it had a suitable topography, and – other than another Danish quarry in the race – had no direct neighbours. Moreover, the team working the site received highly positive signals from both the director of Hedeland I/S and the municipality responsible for the permits.

The most challenging work during the next weeks therefore was to develop placement maps to obtain necessary building permits. A fluid group of members, most of which had professional background in urban planning or architecture, did the mapping. To do so, they had to align authority requirements, construction details of art projects and camp layouts, siting needs, and the topography of the new site – which some had not even visited. The evolving requirements of the authorities, growing location insight, and changes in art projects and camps, required numerous iterations of the map. Overall, the placement team recalled around 40 iterations, enabled by extremely efficient communication, accommodating for the often very limited availability of the team members that worked on it in their spare time. "*We had a lot of conversations at 8 am where she said: 'OK, we have 15 minutes after I get out of the shower, so [..] you write down exactly what you need, then I am going to fix this when [I get out]"*

Finally, on July 7, board representatives signed the contract with Hedeland A/S and from there on all energy focused exclusively on this site. However, on the night of July 10, the relocation came to a second dead-stop. By e-mail, the head of building permits of the responsible municipality stated that, because of too high uncertainty and the too

short application period, he would not issue an authorization for the event. With that e-mail, all further meetings with the authorities and the fire department were cancelled.

In the same night, the core team that had been involved in the application process drafted a lengthy response to the municipality. In a follow up call with the municipality employee, they negotiated a preliminary acceptance under the conditions of strict sound curfews, a hard blow for an event that typically also hosted numerous DJs and loud performative art. A board member remembered the meeting where the deal was finalized "*It felt like I was a general who was capitulating my army to the enemy and discussing terms of surrender.*"

Despite the massive implications for many planned art projects and camps, the community reacted predominantly positive to the announcement of the sound curfew. Right away, brainstorming started on Facebook and *Talk*, bringing forward ideas for complying with the noise restrictions while still enabling dancing and music, amongst other leading to a widespread use of wireless headphones ("silent disco") on the event.

The next day, on July 12, a second fundamental restriction hit the community, with the final decision of the fire department, banning all open flames and limiting the number of vehicles on site. This restriction had severe implications on cooking on site, leading to a switch to electrical cooking gear with further implications on the power grid (*"Something you would never do on a festival"*, power responsible). Additionally, it meant that the ceremonial burning of temporary art on the last night of the event would not be possible, creating additional challenges for artists and camps in terms of disposal of the wooden material that was intended for combustion.

On Wednesday, July 18 the build-up of infrastructure on site began, two days later than hoped for and with substantial restrictions from the municipality regarding who and what could be on site before the official start on Sunday, July 22. The crunched build-up put particular pressure on the power team.

After the event had started, the Borderland encountered its third near-death on Tuesday, July 24. The municipality issued an ultimatum to close down the event because of fire safety issues. Within a period of less than 24 hours, the community had to make sure that all campervans held at least 5 m distance to all tents (a regulation that was not specified before), and that all large structures were appropriately reinforced (a regulation that some projects had ignored). In hectic

response, a group of core actors gathered and coordinated people and resources to spread the information to all affected participants – a challenging task considering that the event was already in full blow and had no centralized information strategy or tool. However, they succeeded to meet the requirements, thus the community could continue with the festival until its planned end on Sunday, July 29.

Table 1 - Key events of the Borderland relocation crisis

Event	Date	Response / Actions
Loss of original site for legal reasons	June 11 (preliminary) June 14 (final)	Start of parallel scouting for alternative locations in Scandinavia and Northern Germany
Contract with Hedeland A/S	July 7	Full focus on developing the Hedeland location; continuation of work on application process
Cancellation through municipality	July 10	Negotiation with authorities and re-framing of the event reducing sound footprint (accepted July 11)
New strict fire restrictions	July 12	Re-dimensioning power grid to allow for electrical cooking; increased focus on information and fire safety
(Delayed) Start of build-up	July 18	Crunched build-up of infrastructure; Arrival of small group of co-creators; Navigating issues resulting from new location
Start of event	July 22	Arrival of main bulk of co-creators
Threat of authorities to stop event for safety violations	July 24	Relocation of numerous camping vehicles (placing them in newly created “Kafkaland” area); Reinforcing of large structures; informing participants
Final official event permit	July 25	
Minor issues throughout event	July 23-29	Fluid team of co-creators maintaining infrastructure, communicating with participants and authorities.
End of event	July 29	Followed by several days of dismantling and clean-up

6. Factors of resilience in the Borderland organization

During the relocation crisis, The Borderland organization has proven resilient to substantial disruptions by quickly adapting to the new conditions. To enable this adaptation, the organization has mobilized energy from both individuals who previously engaged in central organizational tasks, and individuals who had not. In adapting to the changed environment, The Borderland has also changed – both temporarily and lastingly – characteristics of the event and organizational aspects.

In the analysis, I have identified the underpinnings of the organization’s ability to absorb disturbances effectively. The identified factors connect to three levels: structure, micro-foundations of individual behaviour and cognition, and contextual

factors of the organization. The identified structural factors – flexible means and goals – are similar to Wied et al.'s (2020) previously described resilient management approaches, and will therefore be touched only briefly.

Yet, as a self-managing organization, the central puzzle in the data was how the Borderland navigated this structural flexibility in a context without defined authority to assign and deploy actants. As such, the case differs substantially from previously reported cases of resilience in temporary organizations, shifting the attention to the interplay of the micro-foundations and contextual factors of resilience.

6.1. Structural factors of resilience

Structurally the Borderland community exhibited two classical key resilience factors rooted in flexibility of goals and means. The data showed that in the organization, goals or success criteria were malleable and considered by many as "low-stakes". One co-creator concluded that this malleability of goals contributes to the overall resilience:

> *"It's quite easy for us to change to fit the environment. Because we are not really dependent on that much. [..] there is not that much stuff that can really ruin the Borderland. It will just change a bit. Even like this music-ban: OK, we can have a Borderland without music, it will probably be OK. [..] People don't need much to make it work."*

Another co-creator described a similar perception:

> *"There are no requirements, except if we didn't have a location it would be difficult. But still people will figure something out. The stakes are much lower."*

For some co-creators, even the entire cancellation of the event was not necessarily a failure, but could be re-framed as an opportunity to drive the core tenet of decentralised organizing even further: as de-centralized parallel events. A former Board member described his experience at the beginning of the relocation crisis:

> *"[B suggested to] just pull the plug and give everyone their [art grants] and say: 'Go do your Borderland wherever you want!' Because as long as you are one hundred people somewhere you can probably get away with it and build the thing you want and do a cool thing. Then it will be a distributed, weird-ass decentralized Borderland. I was quite into that idea. Thought it was cool."*

Moreover, the organization was highly flexible in terms of available means and resources. Following a decision earlier in the year, the budget contained a substantial buffer for unforeseen expenses. Moreover, the flexible structure of many independent de-coupled sub-projects allowed easy shifting of funds as priorities and needs adapted to the new situation. The budget re-shifting concerned in particular electricity due to a massive necessary upscale of the grid. The person leading power realities remembered:

> *"I started bringing in really heavy budget increases. I think they [finance lead & Board] had a talk with each other and then just said 'Just give him the fucking money!' When you are that far behind, you can throw money at the problem to solve it, which is pretty much what we did. [..] Later I found out that me grabbing that money means that some people's projects didn't get funded. Which is a shame, but there has to be some sort of priority, right?"*

In terms of labour resources, the organization benefitted from being a large group of variously skilled and highly motivated co-creators, thus having a considerable pool of skills to draw from. Yet, other than finances that were documented and collaboratively controlled, the Borderland has neither a structured overview of the available skills and people, nor a central managerial body to oversee their actions. The next section therefore explores how individual members step up to become acting co-creators.

6.2. Stepping up – Micro-foundations of organizational resilience

The notion of "stepping up" is a widely shared concept amongst Borderland co-creators. It refers to the act of an individual assuming responsibility for a specific task or need out of their own volition. In absence of a managing or guiding body, this self-driven action of stepping up is thereby a central phenomenon to explore how responses to disruption form in the Borderland organization.

In the analysis, I discerned between two themes shaping this act of stepping up: situational awareness, and motivation for action.

6.2.1. *Situational awareness*

Individuals across the organization displayed a high level of situational awareness, allowing them to identify emerging issues or unmet needs. This awareness manifested through holistic or specific attention, in combination with a given underlying expertise for assessing the situation that the attention was focussed on.

In terms of attention, I found that all individuals I interviewed implicitly or explicitly assumed a coordinating role for a larger or smaller topical area. For this area, they adopted, as one co-creator described, “a motherly perspective”.

> *“It’s like keeping an eye on [..] your own household: ‘OK, we're going pretty low on milk so I should probably buy milk in a few days, and probably need to wash my clothes’. It's the same: ‘OK, we probably need someone to step up to become fire lead [..] no one has spoken about fire needs this year at all. Maybe we should start stirring things up..’ Just keeping that sort of motherly perspective on things.”*

Another long-term co-creator similarly described it as “*like being a parent; fretting ‘the kids’”*. Several co-creators used the metaphor of being the *“spider in the net”* that, through their connectedness, are quick to sense issues, while one described his coordinating role simply as being “*really good at finding [and passing] the ball*”. The areas of concern that the individuals intuitively or deliberately monitored were overlapping and shifting. Framing for their respective foci, were aspects such as interest, care for the community or topic, or a self-perceived feeling of responsibility for the given area.

I found that across all these coordinators, they do not necessarily perceive it as their own responsibility to “catch the ball”. Instead, they often would communicate to and nudge the broader community to step up. This understanding is also engrained in the Board’s self-perception, as a former Board member stated: *“The board makes sure that the stuff that falls between the chairs gets done. They don't have to do it themselves, but you still have a meta-responsibility".*

To identify issues that need attention, or a community member to step up, co-creators apply expertise from their professional or other experiential background. One co-creator used the following analogy *“You see the problems you can fix. [Like] somebody is going up a ladder and you can see that that angle is just really wrong; but people who don't know about that will not see a problem.”* Indeed, I identified in the data numerous instances of co-creators that raised (and fixed) issues that they identified through their professional experience and knowledge as architects, electricians, stage managers, municipal administrators, engineers, event organizers, etc. In identifying adequate action, they consequently applied their pre-existing knowledge of the

technical matter, in context of their knowledge of the Borderland organization, community, and nature of the event.

In summary, active co-creators exhibited a strong degree of situational awareness. They identified current and potential issues, and opportunities through constant scanning of their context by applying professional knowledge, experience, or mere common sense. This situational awareness, while often related to a previously assumed area of responsibility, could also cover areas for which the individual held no direct responsibility. Thus, when individuals realized a need or opportunity for action they might either step up themselves, or communicate the need proactively on the platforms and within their network.

6.2.2. *Motivation to act*

To understand how and why co-creators move from being merely aware of a need, to stepping up and assuming responsibilities, I analyzed aspects that turned them into self-motivated actors. I found that a key driver of such self-propelled action was the realization that a particular issue fell into an area of one's own competence. For example, a member who was previously not involved in the overarching organization of The Borderland recalled how she perceived a call for help supporting the development of Hedeland as a potential site:

> *"I was thinking: 'I work in a municipality that also owns one third of Hedeland. I know the place; I lived right next to it for years. I was the chairman in the riding club [there]. I knew about the [site owner's] structure and the municipality that deals with that part of Hedeland.'"*

Subsequently, she stepped up and became one of the key actors in navigating local bureaucracy and securing the necessary permits for the new location. Another co-creator, who similarly had not contributed to high-level organizational tasks before, remembered how he got involved in 2018:

> *"I think it was maybe because someone asked for someone that knew about municipalities, Danish laws or something like that. And as I've worked quite a lot for urban planning, I thought, 'I can probably do some of that.'"*

This reported feeling of "I can do something here" and in consequence offering help – or simply starting doing – is a prevalent concept in the data. While it is common, it is

not a sufficient pre-condition to explain the motivation to act. As one co-creator described:

> *"I can do [municipality negotiations]; I've done it many times before, but I also know that [..] I would rather have somebody else do that, and I can focus on something else that my heart burns for."*

Similarly, a co-creator responsible for building permits mentioned that while many architects with suitable skills were part of the community, *"they all know that it's a bit of a shitty task"*, and in consequence are not stepping up for it. In addition, other co-creators remembered instances where they clearly saw an issue, but decided not to act on it. Thus, to become a self-motivated actor, I found additional aspects needed to come into play: a desire to act, and a circumstantially perceived ability to act.

For the *desire to act*, I found two types of motivators in the data, which alone, or in combination propelled the individual member to action: a desire to contribute to the community, or a feeling of responsibility for a task or issue.

The desire to contribute connects directly to two core aspects of the Borderland community: the principle of gifting, and the understanding that "everyone is an organizer". Despite recurring laments that with growing size, participants increasingly behave like spectators rather than co-creators, for many being part of the community means to contribute. The data gave many examples of individuals actively looking for tasks to contribute to, or identifying ways of gifting, often even perceived as a duty. As one co-creator described his engagement prior to the crisis: "*I wanted to give back some of the knowledge I had. [..] I wanted to pace my time so that I didn't have any responsibility during the week. [..] If I could pay my due in the pre-production, then I would be free to do whatever I wanted to do during Borderland."*

For most participants, contributing or gifting is limited to art projects, giving food or drinks, running workshops, making music, or simply being there for each other. Yet, organizational tasks too are conceived as acts of gifting. Describing organizers of a sister-event, a co-creator stated: "*They don't receive anything but the pleasure of making things happen. So it's a huge gift to [the] community. And why do they do it? Because!"* Linking to her own contribution during the crisis, she continued: *"It's not like you get a reward or anything. People say thank you. And: 'Wonderful that you*

organized this for us.' [..] I mean you've spent so many hours of your free time doing this. I have received a lot of credit but it wasn't even in my head when we started out."

Additionally to the desire to give, many co-creators also reported a feeling of responsibility. In some cases, this feeling related to previous actions or areas of responsibility that a co-creator had adopted earlier. For example, the person leading the original municipal application process expressed a feeling of personal responsibility for losing the original site propelling his action for finding a new location.

> *"I wanted to fix my fuck-up. I didn't wanna be the one that killed Borderland. I really, really needed to [..] make sure that the event would still come through, and I felt that I was the one with the most information."*

Instead of just rectifying previous mistakes, this feeling of responsibility sometimes was also expressed as a desire to persevere, either against external forces, or just against one's own fatigue. As the power lead remembered: *"People were really dependent on [the power grid], so I don't quit my responsibility. [..] Because I would have such a bad conscience and then I would rather work."*

Many co-creators shared the expressed feeling of responsibility toward the community in their explications why they acted. They might refer to all the preparation work across the community, which should not go in vain, or simply that they could act where others could not. As a co-creator who engaged strongly during scouting remembered the day the loss of the original site was communicated: *"Everybody started panicking, [..] people were sad-smiley-facing the post to hell, and people were angry. [..] But I was in a good situation, I was working alone, I was living in a camper van on a field in Jutland, and I was like 'Fuck this shit! I'm gonna find a new placement!' and I just started calling around, immediately the next day, and drove around and found out what to do."*

In some cases, friends from within the community asking for help triggered this feeling of responsibility. A co-creator, who had resigned from placement responsibilities prior to the relocation crisis, remembered how she stepped back in "*[B] put his hand around me and [said] 'Could you please do the map again, 'cause now it's a new site.' [..] He said that it was super urgent and important that we got this map done."* Amplified by a perception that with the new site the people who had taken over the placement might be overwhelmed, she in consequence stepped back in.

The perceived *ability to act* rooted in, on one hand, feeling to be allowed to make decisions or take actions, and on the other hand a low fear of failure in doing so.

Regarding the first, all involved co-creators experienced a strong feeling of empowerment. One of the co-creators strongly contributing to the placement procedure recalled: *"It was quite clear for me through the whole process that I could make decisions on mostly anything, or knew the people that I had to ask. And that it was more a question if I wanted to or dared to make decisions on stuff because it would influence so many people."* Similarly, co-creators involved in scouting and successively entering preliminary negotiations with site owners expressed a feeling of being empowered to act on their own.

Many of the co-creators reported that it took time for them to get to terms with these unusual structures when they joined the Borderland. They recalled how this feeling of empowerment developed over time when they started grasping the differences to their default organizational experiences. A former Board member recalled: *"[It is] really difficult when you first get into this community; you don't understand how it works. [..] How do things happen? How do you make decisions? And people say: 'It's a do-ocracy, people just do stuff' and you are like 'yeah, yeah, but really, how* does *it work?' and then after a while you realize that ok, that* is *how it works. [..] You have to see the inside of it to have a perspective on it and make sense and that it isn't just magic."*

The person leading power is an example of particular quick adaptation to this different work approach. He had never been to Borderland before and had initially only stepped up as power lead because he was familiar with the former site where he had done festival power grids for other events before. Working on the new site, he had to improvise and decide on the spot on numerous issues that created substantial changes both physically and financially. Recalling these decisions he stated: *"I just prepared for the backlash - and then it dawned on me that there is not gonna be any. Because, why would they waste my time correcting me in things? [..] When [H] had an idea, and I just made it in another way, he was like 'Well, that works too'. As long as it's getting to where it's supposed to be, it does not matter how."*

Adding to this empowerment, several co-creators expressed their trust in getting any support they would need if they – for whatever reason – could not carry forth their initiative. As one of them described it: *"You can have responsibilities that just get*

picked up by somebody else, [..] you just throw [it] up in the air and say: 'I can't catch this; somebody else needs to catch it before it falls!' And then hope for somebody to do it." Indeed, the data provided numerous examples of relatively smooth hand-overs, when individuals – irrespective of the centrality of their responsibility – stepped out because of vacations, work, private priorities, or simply feeling overwhelmed.

Moreover, co-creators perceive this enabling support also through the general helpfulness of others in the community. They feel no barrier in asking for help or advice, and trust that it is given freely. The power lead recollects how the availability of helpers surprised him: *"I don't think that I had a 'no', ever. You can grab anyone in your near vicinity and then even if it's hard work… I think that was kind of one of my waking up to this, because coming from the outside, people don't give a fuck about your problems."*

Overall, self-motivation for stepping up grounded in three self-perceived factors: the skill or knowledge to act; a desire to act, out of a feeling of responsibility to the community or for the specific issue; and a feeling of ability both from the perspective of being allowed to act, and being supported in one's action. These three factors, together with situational awareness, form the micro-foundations of organizational resilience in the individual behaviour and cognition.

6.3. Contextual factors

I identified five themes related to the organizational context, which connected to issues of organizational awareness and the ability to deploy resources. Three of them – diffuse leadership and power (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2005), psychological safety (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011), and action focus (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015) – are similar to previously suggested characteristics of resilient organizations. The remaining two, memetic organizing and interconnectedness, I will discuss in more detail.

6.3.1. *Diffuse leadership and power*

In the perception of the interviewed co-creators, the core organizational characteristic that sets The Borderland apart from "default" organizations, is its do-ocratic or "leaderful" character. Co-creators perceive this as a fluidity in leadership, power, and responsibilities, where everybody is invited to co-create, become a leader for a topic, and create change they want to see. In consequence, responsibilities and roles change hands with a high turn-over rate both between years and also within years.

6.3.2. *Psychological safety*

The data showed rich examples where the organization created psychological safety for the co-creators to act and dare. In particular, members perceive it as a blame free environment in which failing is ok and everybody is treated with *a priori* trust. As a former board member describes it:

> *"You are not judged by previous merits, we expect the best from everyone and if you fuck up, that is fine, [..] you are allowed to do mistakes, even encouraged to do mistakes."*

The communication data from during the crisis supports this perception, where numerous smaller and larger disruptions – that could be related to an individual member's action – were mostly shrugged off without blame from other involved co-creators. On the other hand, community members without prior "track record" – or even without prior participation in the event – could throughout the crisis step up into central responsibilities, trusted and often encouraged by the surrounding co-creators.

Additionally, asking questions or asking for help is common in the organizing process of the Borderland and is indeed encouraged as described by this co-creator: *"People who ask for help [..] are adults! They accept that they don't know everything, and they take responsibility. Responsibility is asking for help!"*

Finally, the fear or failing is further reduced by the perceived low stakes of the overall event. As one former board member considered: *"We do this for fun, no one is getting paid for it, so we have to have fun throughout the process. That also means that all the decisions we take: it's not that important."* Another co-creator concluded: *"in the end, it's just a party."*

6.3.3. *Action focus*

Many of the key actors consider themselves and the people they work with to make Borderland happen as "extreme doers". Overall, the organization exhibits a strong focus on doing things. The *Realities platform*, where all practical matters are discussed, is headed by the mantra "Get shit done™" which, in variations, is reflected often in the interviews and online communication. This focus on action is similar to what Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) termed "Sensitivity to Operations".

While in the month long preparations, the community can delve into lengthy and philosophic debates, the do-ocratic structure promotes informed action particularly close to the event. The case shows this action focus, with little momentary backwards looking, particularly expressed during the relocation crisis. However, for some instances this focus on action revealed a lack of reflection, leading to – as a co-creator framed it – *"weird decisions that were made last minute [and] seemed to grow a bit more out of maybe a sense of panic and a desire to organize our way out of it."*

6.3.4. *Memetic organizing*

One of the most distinguishing organizational features of the Borderland is the absence of almost all formalised procedures, rules, or structures. The community is built around 10 principles that serve as *"reflection to the community's ethos and culture"*[4]. Yet, the purposeful ambiguity of these principles allows a multitude of interpretations – particularly when expanded from a guidance for interaction at the event, their original purpose, to guidance for preparation and organization.

Additionally to those principles, the Borderland has only a vague purpose description in its bylaws, and no written down organizational structures. Over time, the community has developed approaches to create better documentation and transparency of these structures. However, much of the practices and routines are forwarded simply by participating and seeing. Co-creators that joined the community more recently all reported a sense of confusion when they first joined – being overwhelmed by the differences to their default experiences in both social relations and organizing.

"When people arrive, they are confused, [..] somebody is running around in a chicken suit, there is a couch driving past you with three drunk hippies on it, you have no idea what is going on,.. Everything you ever grew up with is put completely on top of everything [..]. What we usually tell people is that they should just see and do. [..] It took me four days the first time, I remember, to understand what the fuck is going on."

Most co-creators report that they started to understand by following other, more experienced individuals around who unintentionally assumed a mentoring role. Yet, I found that learning and understanding happened mainly through observation of the (inter-)actions of these mentors, and less so by explanation or explicit guidance. In a

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[4] https://talk.theborderland.se/d/5dDRz8W7/principles (accessed June 4th 2020)

survey of 326 new participants in 2019, only 45% agreed or agreed strongly that they knew how to contribute before the event. Conversely, 93% of the 323 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the culture, nature, and value of the Boderland better after the event.[5] Aware of this specific mode of disseminating cultures and routines, some of the experienced community members also consciously worked with this "learning through seeing" approach when trying to create change.

A former board member recalled how he pushed his initiative for a more structured advice process: *"In the beginning I couldn't really say 'this is how it will be'. This is not how Borderland culture works. I can't just do that. I will just say: 'This is a way in which I will do it.' [..] Trying to enforce something by just doing it the same way over and over again and hopefully doing it better than people who don't have a structure and then all of a sudden people go 'Oh, there is a structure' and they start doing it that way."*

Thus, many of the organizational principles and routines seem to grow organically, out of types of organizational memes that other community members copy, and guided by vague principles. This lack of formal guidance or rules requires individual or shared sensemaking for the members to assess what actions and behaviour "fit" with the Borderland organization. The resulting ambiguity creates a multitude of parallel interpretations of what The Borderland is or should be.

6.3.5. *Interconnectedness*

In absence of formal hierarchies, the co-creators stress the importance of relationships to other members, which they bring in from the beginning, or develop over time. Reflecting on the issue of power, a recurring topic in all the interviews, a co-creator elaborated: *"If you have traction, people listening, people actually understanding, and engaging with you because you are a known voice: Then you will have a much easier time actually getting influence."*

Another former board member and lead of numerous infrastructural realities expands on this idea, how his connectedness gives him substantial weight to influence decisions: *"There is nothing in the statutes that makes it possible for me to block your decision, but I can. Just by going in [..] and arguing for my cause. Almost inevitably,*

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[5] https://talk.theborderland.se/d/gvmAk4wU/post-event-survey?p=23 (accessed June 4th 2020)

the decision will be halted. That's the really funky thing about this sort of process, we have these super strong but invisible hierarchies."

In consequence, new members or members with expectations of basic-democracy toward the organization are sometimes baffled, criticising nepotism or the absence of equality. Many of the active co-creators indeed acknowledge being basic-democratic has never been the intention. To counter the flaws of a system based on connections, the organization has strived to foster open and transparent communication, to reduce information asymmetries and allow formation of new relations.

Many viewed the *Talk* platform as a – while still difficult to navigate – nevertheless substantial improvement to document and access discussions and decisions related to wider organizational matters. Similarly, the *Realities* platform has, from its launch in 2018 onwards, allowed expanding the number of individuals adopting responsibilities for specific *Realities*. Many of the co-creators that only more recently stepped up to more central responsibilities reported, that they found it easy to build up new connections. For example, a co-creator that only after her deep involvement in the relocation crisis joined the board, reported how she experienced building up these connections: *"The Borderland Board works in a completely different way [of flat structures, decentralization, and do-ocracy]. [..] I had to get used to that but it wasn't difficult; people were nice and very welcoming and inviting me in."*

Being welcoming is a characteristic that links to the Borderland's principle of "Radical Inclusion". Yet beyond that, many co-creators also find the community as extremely open to give advice and answer questions in a supportive and constructive manner. Resulting from this advice seeking, I found in the data numerous examples of clusters where co-creators formed new networks around shared interests, such as the IT backbone of the membership system, the *Dream* funding scheme, consent issues, or making the Borderland CO_2 neutral. Thus, while asymmetric power structures are prevalent within the organization, the personal connections forming these structures are fluid and can – in principle – be built by any member.

In the next section, I will outline how these contextual factors shape and develop the previously identified behavioural factors that form the micro-foundations of organizational resilience in self-managing organisations.

7. Model of micro-foundations of organizational resilience in SMOs

The Borderland organization managed to both identify emerging strains, and deploy their available resources in modes that Vogus and Sutcliffe (2007) described as "positive adjustments". Yet, as a self-managing organization with limited set structures, these positive adjustments were not following a particular managerial approach. In absence of formal authority or leadership, it was thus the cognition and behaviour of the individual members of the organization that formed the basis of resilient action.

Some structural factors, such as malleable goals and flexible financial and physical means allowed for quick and flexible responses. However, the central question was how individual members became self-motivated actors enacting these resilient responses. I found five micro-foundations that contributed to the situational awareness and/or the motivation to act, the latter two constituting necessary precursors for individual resilient response actions. First and second, *situational attention* coupled with *individual sensemaking*, allowed the individual organizational member to "read" the situation or future as potentially straining, thus creating a level of heightened situational awareness. Third, to motivate action, the individual needed to connect this situational awareness with the perception of having the right *experience* to act in response to the given strain. Yet, both awareness and realization of fitting experience in itself were not sufficient to explain motivation. I pointed thus, as fourth and fifth micro-foundations to a strong *desire to act*, combined with a self-perceived *ability to act*, that exceeds a question of skill and links rather to concepts of empowerment.

To explain how these micro-foundations develop in interplay with the organizational context, I will discuss them against the five contextual factors of organizational resilience identified in the data: diffuse leadership and power, psychological safety, action focus, memetic organizing, and interconnectedness (Figure 2).

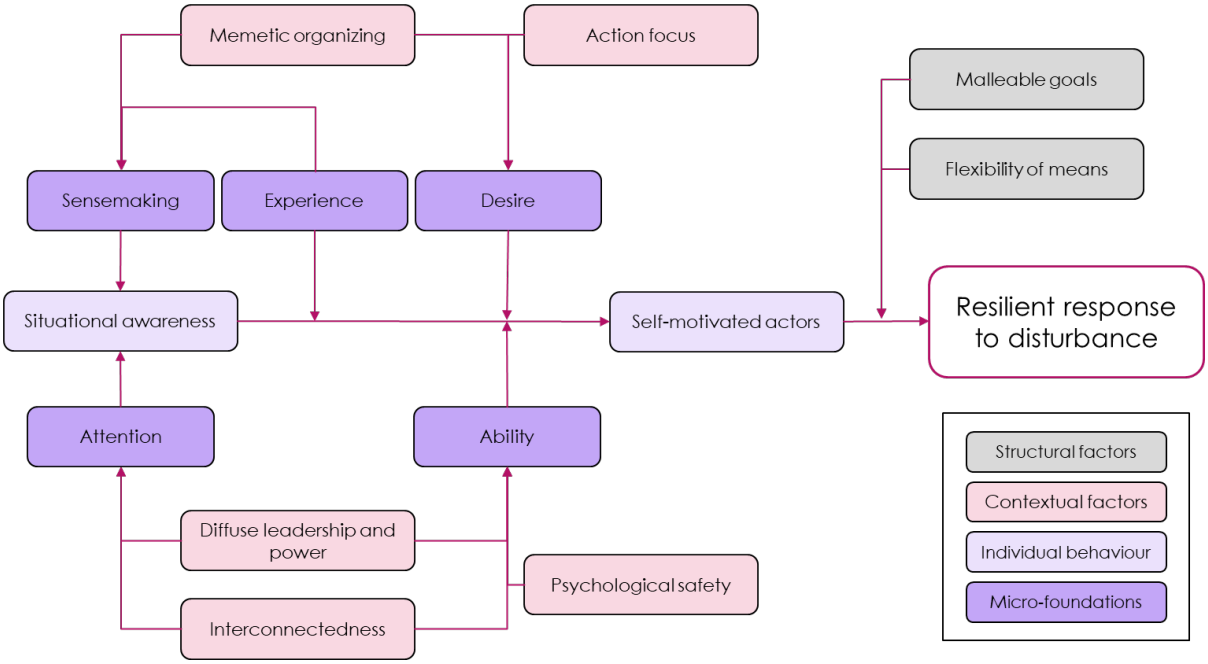

Figure 2 – Suggested model of micro-foundations of organizational resilience in self-managing organizations

Attention is a scarce cognitive resource. Hence, the continuous situational scanning, as observed in the behaviour of the organizational members, requires conscious or tacit justification. I found such justification in the self-perceived responsibility for particular areas – a responsibility that individuals assumed out of their own volition in the given context of diffuse power and leadership. Diffuse leadership, where the idea of individuals "stepping up" is engrained in organizational culture, affects individual perception of responsibility. On one hand, the consequential fluidity of leadership implies, that responsibility can easily be handed over to someone else, or adopted by those more motivated. Yet, on the other hand, the absence of fixed responsibilities means that none of the members can blindly rely that some task is someone else's job. Thus, in such a fluid leadership context, members that may not have explicitly assumed a specific responsibility, still perceive a meta-responsibility to keep a watchful eye for those things that may need action.

Identified issues then in itself could become a driver for action, or simply lead to the act of nudging others in the community to act – either through personal injunctions or as a general communication of a need. In the considered case, this latter nudging of others takes place in a web of highly interconnected individuals. The import of personal relations furthermore added to the individual attention. As "spiders in the net", organizational members receive both explicit and implicit signals from a variety of other

members, through a broad spectrum of communication channels. Thus, they both get pointed towards areas that might require attention, but also receive broad information that feeds into their own situational scanning.

To interpret these signals, the members apply their individual sensemaking framework that draws from their professional background, their prior experience in the organizational context, and the opinions and insights of their surrounding networks. Here it is in particular the type of memetic organizing that enables individual sensemaking. In a context where barely any rules or processes guide organizing, members are pushed to make sense of the organization by seeing, learning, and copying. Thus, situational interpretation or sensemaking is fundamental to the journey of becoming an active part of the organization. Moreover, the ambiguity of the existing principles and practices allows for parallel, diverging, or even paradoxical interpretations and solutions thereby enabling individual action even if not all members share the situational perception.

Moving towards becoming a self-motivated actor, I found that the themes “Desire (to act)” and “Ability (to act)” connect deeply to the idiosyncratic context of the particular self-managing organization. Desire is very strongly linked in two particular memes of the organization: the principle of gifting, and the notion that “everyone is an organizer”. These memes shape an understanding that, in order to be a “true” member, everyone needs to find their niche to contribute. Thus, many members have more or less conscious moments of realization where they find that a need they are aware of together with a skill or experience they possess provides an opportunity to contribute. Additionally, the expressed action focus of the organization contributes to the desire to act on the realized issue, for which the organizational member perceives responsibility. A surrounding with high momentum and high valuation of activity and action, that moreover cherishes the idea of prototyping and experimenting, can support the development of a desire to become similarly active. More so, such action focus can also lower inhibiting barriers, of individual doubts on the ability to act.

The observed self-perceived ability to act, in the context of the organization and the particular situation, related strongly to two concepts pertaining to empowerment that have previously been suggested in the literature on organizational resilience. For one, a high level of psychological safety reduced inhibition to act, based in a trust in

acceptance even in failure, and the ability to gather support when needed (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Second, the diffuse leadership and power structure in the organization provides members with a feeling of legitimized action (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2005). What sets this particular type of SMO apart, is that members perceive the empowerment as taken, rather than given, considering the absence of a specific or generic principal empowering the actor.

Yet, this feeling of taking power, rather than receiving it, does not imply that members act in a vacuum. To the contrary, the high interconnectedness of the members of the community and the high valuation of personal relations, leads to a different type of search for legitimation. Members seek advice and opinions within their network and from members that they know to have material insights, and moreover try to gain active support for their actions within the network. Thus, the ability to act does not only link to an empowering organizational backdrop related to encouragement for action. Much more so, it also relates to an organizational culture that empowers individuals to develop their knowledge and capacity for action.

8. Discussion

Analysing the case of a self-managing organization, where self-motivated individual actions form the basis for resilience, allowed how the organizational context shapes individual behaviour and cognition. The presented model of the micro-foundations of organizational resilience (Figure 2) thus adds a new perspective to the study of organizational resilience. The model outlines not only *what* constitutes characteristics of resilient organizations, but allows theorizing on *how* these characteristics lead to individual cognition and behaviour that build the basis of awareness and responsiveness.

However, the focus on the individual, taken in this research, also sheds light on the dark side of highly self-motivated and self-organized organizations. To achieve the resilient response, numerous co-creators at the centre of responding to the relocation crisis reported extreme levels of fatigue or symptoms perceived akin to burn out, the latter being a known risk in self-organized teams (Barker, 1993). Thus, while the contextual set-up created a high level of momentum, awareness, and motivation within the individuals, it also seemed to lower the attention to their own emotional and physical boundaries, or even motivated them to push beyond those boundaries. Thus,

in the context of research on SMOs, this work adds to the debate on the tension between SMOs being a more humanistic mode of organizing, while also bearing risks for the emotional and physical health of its members (Lee & Edmondson, 2017).

Connected to the burst of energy that drained the co-creators, is the immediate nature of the crisis, which needs consideration when discussing the findings. The relocation crisis posed a clear-cut and temporally defined issue that was easy to understand and to communicate within the community. Thus, little time was lost on interpreting or assessing the situation. Yet, when in 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of the event, the community's response lacked the same sustained momentum. Many members were initially eager to explore what The Borderland could become without a common large gathering, and an overall positive attitude remained in the community. Yet, the energy was less focussed and most initiatives faded out. Future research may explore the interaction between types of crises and the resilience and responses of the organization under given conditions. In the case of the Covid-19 crisis, it may have been the loss of a key identity element – The Borderland being for most members mainly the large gathering, more so than the community around it – that affected the micro-foundations of organizational resilience.

9. Conclusion

In a dynamic and uncertain environment, organizational resilience is a key capability to sustain long-term organizational survival. Yet, resilience is not just smart management, neither is it a general property of an organization nor the sum of a specific set of organizational characteristics. It is the result of the behaviour and cognition of its individual members. Individual awareness allows identifying emerging strains, and individual actions and decisions contribute to resilient deployment of resources. With this work, I proposed a model of how these individual behaviours – the micro-foundations of organizational resilience – manifest in particular organizational contexts. Expanding thus the focus of research on resilience research to the individual actor, I hope that this work sparks further research on the "human" element of organizational resilience.

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